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Judging and Evaluating Range and Pasture Forage Utilization (Proper Grazing Use) for Certain Portions of the Central Great Plains

By Joseph A. May

On the Ground

- Many guidance documents and references have been prepared by federal and state agencies on proper grazing use. This article summarizes these documents for use by field personnel.
- Proper grazing use or acceptable forage utilization can be judged by the use of key forage plants in designated key grazing areas.

Keywords: forage utilization, proper grazing use, range and pasture appraisal, key forage plants, key grazing area.

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The purpose of this paper is to provide the rangeland management specialist, professional agriculturalist, soil conservationist, and extension agent and specialist the basis for making sound and informed conservation planning, decision-making, and livestock grazing management decisions that are ecologically and biologically based for ranch planning and public lands planning within the region of the Central Great Plains.

Many guidance documents and references have been prepared by various federal and state agencies on the subject of proper grazing use throughout the years. I have determined to bring many of these documents and references into one summarized article for efficient use by field personnel. Here is my summary of these documents and references.

Judging Proper Grazing Use

Proper grazing use or acceptable forage utilization by livestock can be judged by the use of key forage plants in design-

nated key grazing areas. According to Stoddart¹ and Smith,² the use of key grazing areas and key forage species in appraising the degree of range or pasture utilization was originated by Standing.³ Proper use of key forage plants benefits the key grazing area. When the key area is properly used, the grazing management unit as a whole is not overused. For clarity's sake, the grazing management unit is defined here as synonymous with such terms as pasture, paddock, etc. However, proper grazing use should not be considered as applied if more than 10% of the grazing management unit is overgrazed or used excessively.

Key Forage Plants

The key forage plants for judging degree of use for each key grazing area should be selected with the stock raiser's participation after considering the plant needs, the area and its potential vegetation, present plant composition, kind of grazing animals, season of grazing, and frequency and length of rest periods. When the key forage plants are properly selected and grazed, the key grazing area should also be properly grazed. The grazing animal will generally have a relatively high preference for the key forage plants. Normally, the key forage plants provide more than 15% of the available forage on the area and are accessible.⁴ Generally, one to three plant species are used as key forage plants.⁵

Key Grazing Areas

The key grazing area is that representative part of a grazing management unit that indicates the grazing pressure being applied to the entire grazing management unit. Identifying and locating the key grazing area is done after considering grazing use patterns and preference areas within each grazing management unit. The key grazing area provides a significant amount, but not necessarily the majority of the available forage in the grazing management unit. For relatively small grazing management units (e.g., paddocks), particularly with

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